

Reading Intersectionality

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No one can really say when the theory emerged. Some say the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw created it. Others locate it even further back, with the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977. Most agree that the category was a way to address the simultaneity of modes of difference. Whether located within the late seventies or the late eighties, the term has become a signature feature of the critical vocabularies of queer studies and academic feminism. It has been used by folks in a variety of fields—gender studies, queer studies, ethnic studies, American studies, sociology, literature, history, and so on. In this essay, I am interested in what I’ve come to think of as a dominant affirmation of and a dominant objection to the category. In its dominant affirmation, intersectionality is engaged as an assemblage of social relations that can be observed as empirical truths. Hence, the affirmation designates intersectionality as the occasion for a positivism that will grant us authentic and true knowledge. The dominant objection, though, characterizes the category as one that preserves ideologies of discreteness, identity politics and so forth. Despite their antinomy to one another, the dominant affirmation and the dominant objection share an affinity: they both are invested in a belief that intersectionality as a signifier is destined toward a meaning of discreteness, truth, and legibility. And as we’ll see, while they disagree about the truth-telling abilities of the category, they both desire a will to truth. Hence, this article investigates how the presumption that intersectionality is ordained for certain ideologies and discourses emanates from a notion in which the relationship between the vehicle for meaning (i.e. the signifier) and meaning itself (i.e. the signified) are predetermined. Such an understanding of language—as it is applied to the category “intersections” and the work that takes it up—ends up disciplining the meaning of intersectional scholarship, threatening—on the one hand—to produce a policing consensus that potentially assigns past work to the dustbin of history and threatening—on the other—to address minority social formations and

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modes of difference as fixed and stable entities that are in the service of empiricist and positivist analytics.

As I hope will be clear, these dominant objections and affirmations presume a theory of language that deserves some thought and meditation precisely because this theory of language—with its presumptions about meaning—assumes and engenders relations of power.¹ Meditating over the linguistic foundations of these objections and affirmations will necessarily require us to go over lessons that many of us have perhaps forgotten. Turning to the linguistic foundations of those affirmations and objections might also inspire a new agenda around the nature of language and its possibilities for critical and intellectual incitement. Here we have an opportunity to create a mode of intelligibility based on the complexity of formations regarded as minor, flawed, or lacking rather than building our intelligibility on the usual foundation, one that can only announce and reveal its erudition through the erection of an other and a will to truth.

The Dominant Affirmation and the Dominant Objection

To begin with, the dominant affirmation of intersectionality posits the category as the means to a positive and authentic knowledge about the lives and experiences of women- and queers of color. In this vein, intersectionality becomes a tool in the arsenal of positivism. Tracing the use of “positivism” to the work of the early French sociologist Henri de Saint-Simon, Herbert Marcuse defines positivism as partly encompassing “the orientation of cognitive thought to the physical sciences as a model of certainty and exactness” and “the belief that progress in knowledge depends on this orientation” (Marcuse, p. 172.) This type of affirmation attempts to assimilate intersectionality into models of certainty and exactness. In this way, the category works to facilitate the ideological presumptions of social scientific methodologies, particularly their claim to get at the truth of (an unmediated) reality.

The dominant critique of intersectionality falls along two axes, one axis charging the category with committing to an idealist outlook, the other axis indicting it as an ideology of discreteness. By an “idealist outlook” I am referring to the notion that the essence of intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality can be found in women of color, queers of color or particular

¹ In this way, my inquiry attempts to frustrate the dichotomy that Foucault posits between relations of meaning and relations of power in the interview “Truth and Power.” He states, “Here I believe one’s point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of war rather than that of language: relations of power, not relations of meaning. History has no ‘meaning’, though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary it is susceptible of analysis—down to the smallest detail—but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies, and tactics” (Foucault, 1980, p. 114).

groups thereof. This idealism oftentimes leads to the charge that intersectionality is thus really an alias for an identity and an identity politics. And as an alibi for discrete ideologies, the objection accuses the category of, ironically, advancing notions of social forces as separable and distinct.

There are—to be sure—articulations of intersectionality that exemplify an empiricist/idealist outlook and presume discrete ideologies. But what is most curious about the dominant critique is that it often presumes that this is the only destination for work that takes up the category “intersectionality.” Like the dominant affirmation, the domination objection—therefore—argues that the destination for intersectionality is predetermined. In such presumptions, the problem with and the promise of the category cease to be matters of its articulation and deployment and instead become matters of its ontology, thus making a claim about the category’s theoretical life and chances. At the heart of the dominant affirmation and the dominant objection is not simply a theoretical disagreement. There is also here a claim about language and its presumably fixed nature.

Discreteness as the Problem of Language

Both the affirmation and the objection believe in the possible naturalization of the sign, a naturalization that eventuates in truth. Intersectionality, in this regard, is naturalized as the sign of discreteness. This discreteness serves the dominant affirmation by reading intersectionality as embodied in a stable and discrete object that is ready for measurement and data extraction. The dominant objection, on the other hand, sees the presumed discreteness as a reason to dismiss the category in an effort to identify a category or theory that will achieve exactness and certitude.

The analysis of discourses of discreteness, exactness, and certitude has been one of the defining preoccupations of the modern study of language. That study, as inaugurated by Ferdinand de Saussure, announced itself by making powerful interventions against the notion that language was fixed and wedded to essential and prior meanings. As Saussure said famously, “language is a system of arbitrary signs” (Saussure, p. 73). In their introduction to the *Course in General Linguistics*, Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy elaborate on this point. In a reference to Saussure’s drawings of the sign, they write, “The little drawings representing the sign as a bubble divided into two halves, signified on top, signifier on the bottom, suggest that the sign is a whole that can be analytically divided into parts (as if sign = signifier + signified) and that these parts fit together like two halves of a split egg. Symmetrical to each other, these halves seem as inseparable as the front and back sides of a single ‘sheet of paper’.... But this would be to naturalize the sign, to make it into a thing, to offer it a position in reality that would confer on it an essence” (Meisel, p. xxx). Further emphasizing that arbitrariness, they wrote, “Language is primarily a relation between two sets of things that have ‘nothing in common in essence’ between them” (Ibid, p. 27). The modern study of language begins with the critique of language as containing

an essential nature in an attempt to reveal the contingent, non-essential, and arbitrary nature of language.

Saussure's observations would set the foundations for later inquiries by thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Hélène Cixous, Michel de Certeau, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Rancière, and Monique Wittig. Derrida, in particular, would address the issue of discreteness as the problem of language rather than the problem of a term. For instance, in her preface to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak points to Derrida's interest in Heidegger as one over "the problem of definitions": "...in order for the nature of anything in particular to be defined as an entity, the question of Being in general must always be broached and answered in the affirmative" (Spivak, p. xiv). Whether the being in question is a social force, a mode of difference, a historical period, language forces the speaker and the writer to engage that being as if it were a discrete entity. This is partly what leads Spivak to observe, "In examining familiar things we come to such unfamiliar conclusions that our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us" (Ibid). The study of language since Saussure has been an effort to further deliberate on the immutability and mutability of language. This observation about language has real consequence for how we engage the category "intersectionality."

The Ontological Claim and the Transcendent Subject

The arguments about intersectionality's ontological appropriateness and inappropriateness have direct bearing on arguments about the problematic nature of language in general. If the problem with language is reduced to the nature of the category—as in the case of the dominant objection to "intersectionality"—then perhaps there's a better category that will not be bent and twisted. But as Spivak says, "To make a new word is to run the risk of forgetting the problem or believing it solved" (Ibid, p. xv). As a deliberation on language, deconstruction was in part a demonstration that you could not circumvent the problem of discreteness or essentialism in language through neologisms. The right word would not bring us to the truth, would not permit us to transcend vulnerability. Again Spivak: "That the transformation of the language which contemplates the essence of Being is subject to other demands than the exchanging of an old terminology for a new one, seems to be clear" (Ibid.).

Whereas intersectionality—for the dominant objection—becomes a distraction from analytical exactness, the category—for the dominant affirmation—becomes the "purified [object] of scientific measurement" (Marcuse, p. 185). As the purified object of scientific measurement, intersectionality and the methods used to assess it presume an analytical enterprise that can know—in the most absolute ways—the facets of minority life. In this sense, intersectionality is construed as a theory that is ontologically suited for positivist errands that can demonstrate and facilitate the incline of knowledge. Both the dominant objection and the dominant

affirmation, thus, represent radical rejections of our vulnerability as the subjects of knowledge.

As part of the poststructuralist meditation on vulnerability, deconstruction would be a radical acceptance of our modern precariousness, teaching us never to assume that we could extract ourselves from the conflicts and the drama of language and encouraging us—as Spivak says in a later interview—to “forge a practice that takes this into account” (Spivak, 1990, p. 20). Such a practice is what deconstruction refers to as “sous rature” or what Spivak translates as “under erasure.” Describing what it means to hold things under erasure, she writes, “This transformation should rather involve ‘crossing out’ the relevant old terms and thus liberating them, exposing the ‘presumptuous demand that thinking know the solutions of the riddle and bring salvation’” (Spivak, 1976, p. xv). The study of language was, thus, also the analysis of the artifices that constituted a supposedly transcendent subject. Theorizing intersectionality might be another way to consciously analyze that artifice.

Truth and Power...Still

Critical work on epistemological formations has also taught us that the will to and the desire for truth is never simply a matter of getting it right. To this end, the struggles over the category “intersectionality” are much more than efforts at empirical and theoretical precision; they have become the settings for battles over truth and power. Discussing the relationship between truth and power, Foucault said, “Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). Both the hegemonic affirmation and the hegemonic objection to intersectionality represent attempts to control the production, regulation, distribution, and circulation of intersectionality as a category and statement, managing it so that it yields—through itself or by its dismissal—some essential truth. In his theorization of truth as a mode of power that works to distinguish what is accepted from what is dismissed, what is accurate from what is false, Foucault argued, “There is a battle ‘for truth,’ or at least ‘around truth’—it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean ‘the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted,’ but rather ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true,’ it being understood also that it’s not a matter of a battle ‘on behalf of the truth,’ but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays” (Ibid, p. 132). We can think of the hegemonic affirmation and objection to intersectionality as different effects of power, ones that attempt to shape an economy and politics of knowledge around who can speak with authority about the simultaneity of race, gender, sexuality, class and so on.

The Writerly Potentials of Intersectionality

A critique of intersectionality that takes the category as ontologically problematic or certain is the stage for the entrance of a transcendent subject or subjects. As long as we read intersectionality as an immutable sign, we will always presume that we know what the category means before we even take the time to come to terms with its deployment within a particular text. It becomes a way of denying the writerly potentials of the category.

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes distinguished between the readerly versus the writerly aspects of a text. He said about the writerly text, “It is *ourselves* writing, before the infinite play of the world is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages” (Barthes, p. 5). The readerly text is precisely the one that is reduced to a singular meaning, the one whose goal is to produce a product rather than to facilitate a production. If we interpret intersectionality as a readerly text that embodies a singular meaning rather than a writerly text that has a plurality of doorways and openings, then we can only commit ourselves to a pessimistic vision about what it is possible to do and to think—with that category and possibly others as well. By doing so, we place a ban on the kind of intellectual and political subjectivities that might emerge from how we play with language. Indeed, anti-racist feminist and queer work has to be an insistence on that sense of play, a sense of play that is absolutely vital for the emergence of new kinds of political and intellectual subjects.

One of the most exciting occurrences is the emergence of work that addresses intersectionality as a flexible sign that captures not only practices of signification but relations of power as well. This is work that also refuses to engage intersectionality as naturally problematic or as part of an empiricist and positivist errand that attempts to reveal the “fact” of minority life and “the truth” about heterogeneity. For instance, by engaging intersectionality as a mode of analysis that insists on the “importance of race, class, gender, and sexuality as interlocking and mutually exclusive,” Grace Kyungwon Hong in *The Ruptures of American Capital Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* theorizes women of color feminism as a reading practice that “reveals the contradictions of the racialized and gendered state” (Hong, p. x). In a similar fashion and building on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, Chandan Reddy in *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the U.S. State* suggests that we might engage intersectionality as a critique of the material limitations of placing women of color (and queer of color) political and intellectual interventions in ideologies of discreteness. As he observes, “Within the juridical context, black women’s acts of representation were either elided, silenced, neutralized, or contradicted through their assimilation into existing so-called race- and gender-specific *standpoints* within the law, or, in an anxious act of supplementation, figured as a distinct standpoint within the existing legal account of social relations, with sharply restricted meaning” (Reddy, p. 31).

Reading intersectionality as a retheorization of materialist critiques of culture, Jodi Melamed, in *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, addresses literature as a globally inflected racial project that has proven crucial for various liberal and neoliberal formations. Discussing women of color feminism's elaboration of intersectional analysis as a project that targeted aesthetic and state practices, she states, for instance, "the functions and values that women-of-color feminism ascribed to literature stood in sharp contrast to the notions of literary value that emerged out of the canon debates and stabilized liberal multiculturalism as a regime of official antiracism" (Melamed, p. 104).

In *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, Erica R. Edwards deploys intersectional frameworks as way to mobilize black feminist critique as an intellectual mode that has "been able to hold in tension a critique of dominant structures and a critique of how ethnic nationalism compromises with [those] structures..." (Edwards, p. xviii). Intersectionality, in this sense, becomes deployed as a politico-theoretical analysis of the unlikely collusions between the dominant and the radical.

Lastly, in Fatima El-Tayeb's *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, intersectionality becomes a way to imagine a coalition politics as part of a comparative analytical agenda. She writes, "In pushing beyond binary, essentialist notions of identity, women of color feminism initiated a shift in paradigms, lastingly shaping the search for methodological tools that allow for 'fuzzy edges' and intersections rather than depending on the creation of boundaries, making possible the exploration of commonalities while paying close attention to specific circumstances" (El-Tayeb, pp. 47-48). As such, El-Tayeb deploys intersectionality as a comparative and diasporic reading practice for local and global processes that impact European communities of color. For El-Tayeb, Edwards, Melamed, Reddy and Hong, intersectionality is not maneuvered to fix the meanings or exact the truth of women of color or queer of color bodies and experiences. Each of these theorizations differently work the mutability of the sign of intersectionality, maneuvering the category's variability to account for modes of power as they are articulated in the terrains of culture, nation, and capital.

To read intersectionality as a category that can only muster a univocal meaning is to ignore the innovative work that countless people have done. As a theoretical practice, the category arises out of women of color and queer of color formations, formations that were not themselves univocal. If—as the modern study of language suggests—"life and language are standardized in relation to one another" (Meisel and Saussy, p. xviii), presuming the potential dynamism of that category is also a way of assuming the vitality of the social formations that occasioned it. In other words, how we read the intellectual production of minoritized life is a measure of how well we appreciate the complexity of minoritized life.

It's important to remember that within the history of the social movements that occasioned interdisciplinary interventions within and outside the academy that those movements, like particular theorizations of language, disrupted the notion that certain modes of difference were immutable. In doing so, they demonstrated the arbitrariness of articulations of gender, race, class, and sexuality. As such, they underlined the mutability of the sign of difference. Approaching the categories of feminist, queer, and anti-racist analysis as mutable signs is a way of acting not only in concert with theories of language that allow for new associations and new redistributions of what is sensible. They are also ways of acting in concert with the epistemological dynamism of radical movements of that moment. They too were—to paraphrase Barthes's remarks about writerly texts—"novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure" (Barthes, p. 5).

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